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A review of Jeanne Chall's book "Learning to Read: The Great Debate" is presented. A summary of the book's research and a reaction to its content are offered. The following four elements considered important to effective reading instruction are listed: (1) teacher competence, (2) pacing, (3) method, and (4) content (motivation). The manner in which the book treats these four elements is examined. Dr. Chall's emphasis on methodology is questioned, and the need for emphasis on the whole learning environment and the teachers' role in beginning reading instruction is pointed out. (RT)

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LEARNING TO READ: THE GREAT DEBATE

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SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

There are four distinct phases to the research reported in LEARNING TO READ: THE GREAT DEBATE by Jeanne Chall (McGraw-Hill Book Co., $8.50). First and most important, Chall re-examined in great detail previous research on beginning reading instruction, particularly that concerned with phonics. She then turned to the basal textbook program and scrutinized its structure and program in great detail. Once again the focus is on initial phases of instruction. As a third phase of her study, she visited many classrooms both in this country and in England. Finally, she interviewed a number of persons closely aligned with the various approaches with which she is concerned.

While information and data drawn from each

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of these sources influence her conclusions, by far the greatest weight is given to the reviewing and reanalyzing of previous research relative to phonics.

Her five major recommendations in summary form are as follows:

1. Beginning reading instruction should shift from a meaning—emphasis to a code-emphasis approach.
2. There should be a complete reexamination of what kind of content should be included in reading programs.
3. Reading-grade levels should be reevaluated, because nothing justifies their sharply restricted vocabularies.
4. Better diagnostic and achievement tests should be developed.
5. Research into reading should be greatly improved.

A REACTION TO THE RESEARCH

Jeanne Chall's examination of the great debate in reading instruction is a fascinating book; but, unfortunately, it deals with the wrong problem. Perhaps it is more generous to say that the problem is misstated. What is in reality but a fraction of a larger problem, Chall treats as essentially the whole issue. She gives disproportionate attention to methods of teaching initial word recognition, ambiguously termed "beginning reading."

While learning to recognize words is an important initial task, it is not nearly so great a problem in learning to read as Jeanne Chall would have us believe. Nor does compressing the time factor (hurrying at the beginning of first grade) seem so crucial when learning to read is viewed as a long-range developmental process.

Chall's research focuses solely on method. In addition, she overemphasizes the initial phase of reading instruction. She does recognize other factors and treats them quite thoroughly, but she does not give them proper weight in forming her conclusions.

The variable of teacher competence is a major case in point. While Dr. Chall discusses the quality of teaching with considerable respect, she treats it lightly as a variable affecting reading instruction. The USOE-sponsored "First Grade Studies,"[1] however, clearly indicate that competent teaching is the predominant factor in beginning reading and that other factors, including method, are secondary.

Briefly, four elements are important to effective reading instruction — beginning or otherwise — according to the "First Grade Studies" report. In order of their relative importance these are (a) teacher competence, (b) pacing, (c) method, and (d) content (motivation).

Chall looks at each of these four dimensions of reading instruction, yet in the summary of results no important recognition is given to any factor other than method (pp. 82-84 and final chapter). One has to read Chapter 9 carefully to perceive her views on teacher competency. Similarly, the problem of content (motivation) is dealt with incidentally in various sections of the book. (See p. 310 for summary.)

This then is why I say that Chall deals with the wrong problem. The author has attributed to methodology a position and prominence far beyond its true significance in the total scheme of teaching reading, beginning or otherwise. Consequently, she fails to present a balanced picture.

Perhaps Chall has exercised a scholar's prerogative in limiting her research to methodology and, consequently, in confining her major findings to the realm of method. By doing so, however, she has expended enormous effort on but a minor segment of what actually constitutes

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[1] Bond, Guy L., and Dykstra, Robert. "Coordinating Center for First Grade Reading Instruction Programs." U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education. Project No. X-001. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1967. (Unpublished)
Summary accounts of the 27 first grade reading studies coordinated by the Center may be found in Stauffer, Russell G., editor. "U. S. Office of Education First Grade Reading Studies." Reading Teacher. Vol. 19, No. 8 (May 1966) and Vol. 20, No. 1 (October 1966). Published by the International Reading Association, Box 695, Newark, Del. 19711.

beginner's progress. The reader may applaud as she reveals many instances of malpractice. Often she expresses shock. But pacing (time of introduction and intensity of instruction) is not method; and, thus, issues become blurred in her final analysis (see Ch. 8). How instruction is conducted (method) ought not to be confused with how much and when the instruction is given (pacing). Unfortunately, Dr. Chall perpetuates this confusion.

There is no reason why the "meaning emphasis" approach cannot move as rapidly in teaching word recognition (both letter parts and whole words) as does the "decoding emphasis." The fact that it doesn't is only a matter of convention. Method is but a minor part of this convention. To call convention "method" is to overgeneralize. Chall does. Admittedly it takes a lot to change convention, but change is more urgently needed in this than change in method.

Method

It would be ideal if method alone could be examined through research. We might learn something important about method if we could look at it unencumbered by the other weighty variables of teacher competency, pacing, and content (motivation).

Chall makes a genuine effort to examine methodology in isolation. As a consequence, it is difficult to refute her strong position in favor of a decoding emphasis to beginning reading instruction. Although this review cannot duplicate the detail presented in the book, an attempt will be made to present the author's point of view on the problem of method.

Although decoding is never succinctly defined, Chall uses the term as it is generally used; namely, learning to work with component parts of words. Parts of words may be in the form of letters, letter patterns, letter sounds, and word substructures. In decoding, knowing letters and knowing words are considered identical responses. The decoding emphasis disregards the fact of unity inherent within words both in form and meaning.

It seems fallacious to assume that once recognition is mastered, meaningful reading will follow. It doesn't for many emerging readers. So one is impatient to find the "meaning emphasis" approach summarily dismissed.

No one can argue against Dr. Chall's contention that accelerating efforts (decoding emphasis) to teach recognition in the initial period (first grade) will produce an immediate increment of growth. The bulk of evidence supports the notion that adding a "decoding emphasis" to the firmly established "meaning emphasis" approach (basal text program) will achieve greater accomplishment than that obtained from the basal program alone. How could it be otherwise?

No reasonable person can dispute that teaching two approaches, rather than one, will produce more recognition at the initial stages of reading instruction. But the fundamental question of, "Why the hurry?" has not been answered. Just how does the beginning reader use this new-found power of recognition?

At this point, it must be made patently clear that no defense of pacing associated with current textbook programs is being offered. It is slow. Dr. Chall discussed this situation rather thoroughly and with a touch of brilliance. She does suggest some alternatives under the heading of "Reevaluating Grade Levels" in the conclusion (p. 312). But she is ever so terse, and the reader may easily overlook these suggestions.

One looks at her conclusion in vain for a vigorous statement with regard to using new-found skills of recognition. She does not suggest how this power of recognition may be used for extensive exploration of ideas in many books and for learning to read continuously over long stretches of print. In short, how does the quick-entry group (decoding emphasis) propose to make readers who can think in and with print? One must search the detail quite thoroughly to find any inkling about how this vital problem is to be resolved. (See p. 307.) If it isn't resolved, what is the advantage of the quicker approach?

Some serious proposals to meet these issues have been advanced. This reviewer would have preferred that the Individualized Reading Program (IRP) not be dismissed so lightly. IRP is a positive program that teaches children how to use books effectively and how to get ideas of value from them. Without some reasonable alternative to tedious examination and reexamination of the

ideas in basal textbooks (pacing), the "hare" theory (decoding) rather than the "tortoise" theory (meaning emphasis) approach to word recognition is to no avail. Again Dr. Chall touches this major issue but does not confront it. She offers no major alternative to the basal program. It is here, as far as this reviewer is concerned, that Dr. Chall exhibits a major deficiency.

Decoding is not an end in itself, but Chall never acknowledges this. She blurs the point badly, as do other proponents of the decoding emphasis approach, who never provide a satisfactory explanation of how the child moves from learning to respond to fractional parts of words to responding to words themselves. This jump from fractured words to total word forms cries for some sound theoretical rationale. In my opinion, no one can be proficient as a reader while recognition is at the letter level, as the decoding emphasis teaches.

Chall also fails to acknowledge that every word form is unique. Ultimately, the beginning reader must respond to the basic fact that each word form has an individual identity, or he will flounder endlessly. It is becoming visually familiar with the individual identity and with the total word form that enables instant, automatic word recognition.

One looks in vain for acknowledgment that print for the beginner is visually strange or foreign in appearance. The real task in word recognition for the beginner is to work out the strange appearance of print and to become familiar with each and every word form in terms of its own particular identity. All beginners need time to get used to the way words look, some much more than others.

Thus, in reality, method doesn't make that much difference for most children. This is supported by research evidence[2] that indicates that most children (85-90 percent) progress satisfactorily regardless of the method employed, i.e., meaning emphasis or decoding emphasis. How quickly or intensively the problem of strangeness is met, whether it is approached apart from or in conjunction with concern for meaning (meaning emphasis) is much more a matter of timing and pacing than of method alone.

Certainly, anyone has the right to approach the twin problems of recognition and meaning in sequence rather than simultaneously as in the basal program. But this is a matter of preference. Intensifying and hastening the recognition step is a matter of prerogative first, pacing second, and methodology third. But the problem of producing a meaningful reader remains.

This writer's experience shows that beyond the primary grades, problems related to meaningful response are far greater than those of word recognition per se. Exclusive of proper nouns, typical, intermediate-grade readers can usually recognize words beyond their meaning level. Or, conversely, if recognition breaks down, it is because the word is unknown in terms of its meaning, rather than its pronunciation only. With minor exception (less than 5 percent), the difficulty is not that of mere recognition. The majority of problem readers beyond the initial level don't think meaningfully with printed words when words are arranged in continuous context.

Content

Dr. Chall treats the content within beginning reading material as an important item, if not as a research consideration (see Ch. 9, p. 269). Her comments on content as a motivational factor in contrast to motivation derived from successful learning per se seem sensible and do not warrant an argument. Restricting the beginning reader to a particular pallid content is unnecessary and calls for greater flexibility in the use of more interesting and exciting materials than currently is permitted.

Surely, the point -- that any learning task can be presented to children in either a stimulating or stifling fashion -- makes sound sense. Any learning activity can be exciting or deadly. To condemn any approach as inherently dull or on motivational grounds is pure folly. Every competent teacher establishes the positive learning environment. Professional educators must not be trapped into useless arguments about endorsing a particular approach because "children like it." Professional responsibility requires educators to determine the virtues and values of each task and then to teach these tasks in a manner that

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[2] Ibid.

beginning reading instruction and has magnified the distortion by deliberately singling out methodology as the conclusive focal point.

Let us examine in more detail the manner in which Dr. Chall examines the four elements important to effective reading instruction.

Teacher Competence

Dr. Chall acknowledges (Chapter 9, pp. 270 and 308) that the teacher, not the method, is the major instrument of instruction. This reviewer wonders why this factor was glossed over in the final appraisal. It is granted that the best teachers armed with the most effective teaching techniques produce the best results. The order of these two elements, however, is very important. Teachers must come first. More energy should be expended in increasing teacher competence than in altering this or that particular method.

Pacing

What about intensity of instruction? By reading Chall carefully (Ch. 9, p 274 and p. 302 and Ch. 10), it is readily seen that teachers of the "decoding emphasis" spend more time, start earlier, and usually attach -- barnacle fashion -- the new approach to the existing "meaning emphasis" basal reader program. Such variables are not a methodological consideration; they are better described as concerns of pacing.

For the purpose of this review, pacing is defined in terms of the time of introduction and the amount of instruction given to a particular instructional approach. For pupils it is the rate at which progress is made through material being read. (See p. 302 for Chall's definition.)

The reader is frequently excited by the insightful revelations Dr. Chall makes regarding the pace of instruction associated with basal reading instruction (Sec. 3, Ch. 7 and 8), for here is the real culprit.

The basal textbook program is slow-paced by design. In addition, every lesson is complicated by the intricacies surrounding each step in the teacher's guide. Such elaboration causes the teacher to proceed with reading instruction at a laborious rate. For instance, within the basal program the "decoding" part of word recognition instruction is developed over three primary grades.

Dr. Chall is most sensitive to the problem of instructional pace and is most harsh in her condemnation of several practices that retard the

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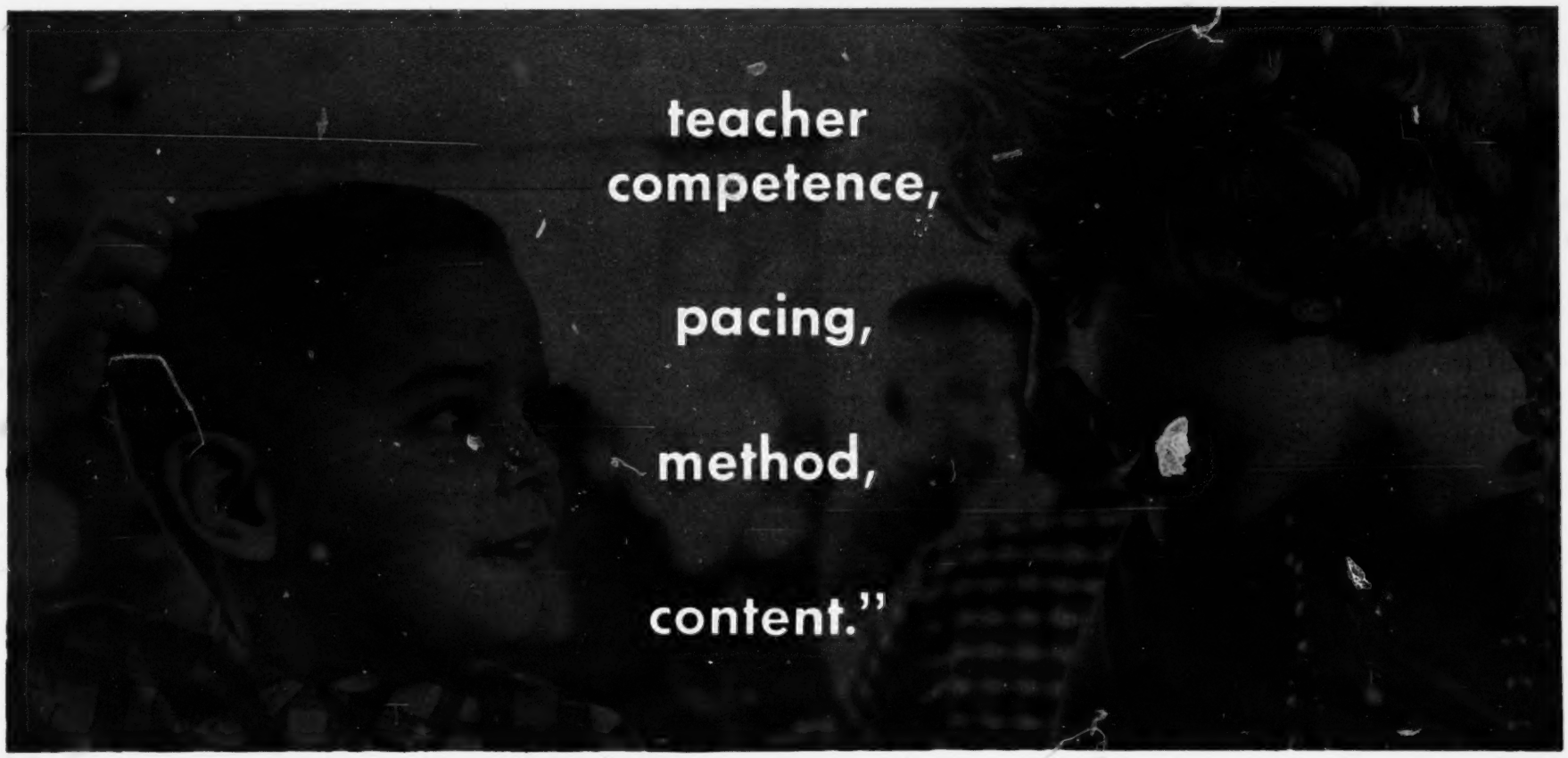

stimulates the children to learn. In reality, then, both content and accomplishment should complement, not contest, each other as motivational forces. Effective teachers use both components successfully and do not restrict content to the extent that it becomes a major issue in teaching reading.

Summary

The teacher must establish the environment for learning. Creating an atmosphere that enables maximum learning by every child is the main teaching task. Manipulation of materials as an expression of any particular method is but part of formulating this learning environment. While method is an integral part of the total situation, mere manipulation of method itself cannot build the environment nor can it create a positive climate for learning to read. Yet it is always easy to delude oneself that the fractional part called method is the whole. Competent teaching is achieved by delicately balancing many ingredients, of which the two most important are support and challenge.

The teacher must provide the proper balance of support and challenge to ensure maximum learning. When learning tasks are too easy or the pace too slow, it is easy for the teacher to provide support, yet at the expense of presenting challenging learning tasks. The tedious pace of the basal textbook is a good example. Endless teacher questions, meticulous attention to detail, and the intensive reading of every word make teaching beginning reading a slow motion affair. Boredom abounds; consequently, many incipient readers are not challenged.

Dr. Chall apparently knows that the learning environment is the crux of the matter. Yet, because reams of research deal with method, Dr. Chall makes this the central issue. She becomes a victim of the poorly executed research that she so vigorously condemns. Her contribution to the field of reading instruction would have been greater had she attacked the problem of learning climate as vigorously as she did that of method. Unfortunately, teachers of beginning reading must await bolder solutions to problems defined in a larger, more serious context. Dr. Chall displays the scholarly power to do this. Hopefully, next time she will.

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